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### **Biography**

Penny Macbeth is Dean of Manchester School of Art, at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her research focuses on cloth as a catalyst for change, hope and activism, her work is specifically focused on the practitioner's engagement with cloth, through a series of case studies and evaluations of her own and others community outreach projects.

She co convened the International conference, Outside: Activating Cloth to Enhance the Way we live with the artist and academic Dr Claire Barber. The conference explored the complex and multifaceted relationship humans have with cloth, and examined the constantly evolving fields of expression outside traditional gallery, institutional or campus settings. This work was developed further into a co-edited book of the same title published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing in 2014.

Since then she has developed various papers and book Chapters such as Craft in Unexpected Places, exploring cloth's value and what cloth represents as a social and symbolic object.

Macbeth is currently collaborating with Barber on a significant curatorial project.

## **A Matter of Life and Death**

The Paracas textile 300-200 BC held in the British Museum is one of our earliest examples of socially engaged or socially enacted cloth. It presents us with an insight into ritual, social value and care at one of the most significant moments of a human life ones death. The highly intricate woven and stitched fragments form part of a mummy bundle a decorative cloth swathed in layer upon layer of cotton fabric.

This paper will explore three moments in history across a timeline of nearly 2000 years, examining the active use of cloth and its ability to punctuate our human lives, it will draw on archival sources and oral histories to explore this idea further.

Keywords: socially engaged, socially enacted, cloth, ritual, value, life, death

### **Introduction**

We signify cloth with meaning, ritualising its use. In the Catholic Church religious icons are draped in cloth during the Easter Passion. Cloth is utilised by many cultures to swaddle new born babies. A practice that helps the infant feel

‘contained’ or held helping them to feel settled and less fretful. Cloth is also intimately associated with our rituals around death.

The precariousness of life and the utility and ubiquity of cloth mean that it and our creative relationship with it, can give us a unique insight into lives lived.

During this paper I will explore three moments in time and place, that examine the notion of what we might understand by socially engaged or socially enacted textiles.

## **Dressing the Dead**

The Paracas textiles held in the British Museum are one of our earliest enduring examples of cloth. They date from around 300 BC and provide us with an insight into an early Peruvian society and its rituals associated with life and death. The fragments of textile survive due to the uniquely arid conditions in which they were buried.

“ Like the Egyptians the Peruvians mummified their dead and in Peru as in Egypt textiles were intended not just for wearing in daily life but also for clothing the mummies” (MacGregor 2010, 155)

Elaborately dressing the dead was clearly part of this process as was the placement and wrapping of the deceased, the archaeologist Julio. C. Tello who discovered the extraordinary burials in 1925 observed that:

Hundreds of Mummy bundles wrapped in multiple layers of exquisitely decorated textiles, including mantles or shrouds. Sometimes more than sixty layers of textiles covered one Mummy. These garments were elaborately embroidered in rich colours of red, dark blue, dark green and yellow. The textiles seem to have been made primarily for inclusion in the mummy bundles. (“As of 6<sup>th</sup> April, 2018 the Textile Museum of Canada

listed on it's website

[www.textilemuseum.ca/cloth\\_clay/resources/paracas.cfm](http://www.textilemuseum.ca/cloth_clay/resources/paracas.cfm)")

The Canadian weaver and expert on the Paracas textiles, Mary Frame describes the process of creating the Mummy bundles explaining that "some were immense one was 87ft long. It would have been a social enactment a happening to lay out the yarns to make these cloths." (MacGregor 2010,155)

This was clearly a highly organised, large scale, human endeavour that galvanised society for a common purpose. But why create these intricate fabrics and undertake such an elaborate method of wrapping in their execution? What appears extraordinary is the number of people buried in this way.

The appropriation of such vast amounts of cloth would have been itself a feat of human endeavour, a complex set of processes. Just the acquisition of cloth in the first place, the sourcing, spinning, weaving, dyeing and embroidery. This before it's ritualistic use, which in itself would have had to have been orchestrated.

This 'social re-enactment' as Mary Frame describes it, is something that is not exclusive to the early Peruvians. This attention and care to the physical clothing, winding or covering of a body with cloth prior to the souls journey is played out through time, history and place across most of our world religions. More often than not manifesting itself through a domestic endeavour, wrapping, washing, skill, prayer, passed down through generations.

## **Remembrance**

The Active use of Cloth for the early American pioneers is deeply associated with their production of Quilts for ostensibly very practical reasons: in order to provide comfort and warmth. Quilts were also very much tied into the status and

social standing of a family revealing the identities of individuals and communities.

The quilt commemorated life's big events birth, death, betrothal /marriage. Stitch itself was fundamental to this way of life. Quilt history tells us that girls started to learn to sew around the age of three, sewing and mending was a really important job, boys also learnt to sew and men unable to take up farm work were deployed in this way. However this was ostensibly women's work and it was a serious business. Quilts and animal skins kept a family warm through cold winters materials were scarce. A girl set about piecing together her patchwork tops, stopping only when having completed her 12<sup>th</sup> and hopefully now betrothed would then start her wedding quilt. The majority of these tops were produced and completed during organised sewing bees, which gathered together the local community of skilled women and girls to complete the task.

For the early California settlers, heading west across America on the wagon train was a precarious and slow journey. The ability to convene a sewing bee was at best limited. Some of these early pioneer quilts were made during the entirety of a woman's life. In others the stitch hand noticeably changes, the original maker having passed on, the task completed by a sister, daughter or mother. Half finished items would be picked up nothing could be wasted. The academic Peter Stallybrass explains this as "The quilt itself takes on a complex social life of its own." (Stallybrass 2012,73) The quilt or material used in its production being passed on.

One such quilt was made on the journey west on the wagon train from Illinois to California.

Mary Margaret Hezlep began making her quilt *the road to California* in 1859 when she was 15 years old. She travelled over 7 months on a covered wagon with her mother and her 72 year old grandmother. The blocks for the patchwork had been prepared and cut before the trip began. All 30 women in the wagon train contributed to its patching, and signed their names on it. The quilt itself was only finished 20 years after the journey was completed, given by Mary to her daughter Mae on her 14 birthday, “a quilt stitched full of history in which Mae’s mother, grandmother and great-grandmother left evidence of their episodic adventure across the country.” (Ray Laury and California heritage quilt project 1990, 46)

The harsh reality of life for the American pioneers meant that nothing could be wasted, and recycling, was an imperative. The settlers kept every scrap from clothing, dress making, furnishing, and waste materials from rice and flour sacks. They re-used the smallest of scraps by patching them together to make Crazy Quilts. The Crazy quilt is symbolic of this way of life, and led to “the frontier adage that although women die, their clothing lives after them.” (Ray Laury and California heritage quilt project 1990, 13)

The Memory quilt produced by Kaziah Bathurst between 1880-1890, Figure 1. is a startling example of this. This is a cotton quilt, beautifully conceived and stitched with its “carefully pieced baskets with their appliqued handles” (“As of 11<sup>th</sup> April, 2018 the national museum of American history listed on its website [www.americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah\\_556477](http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_556477)”) made by

Kaziah for her stepson Samuel from scraps of his mother Emily's dresses. Kaziah went on to make quilts for her other 6 step children from their deceased mothers clothes and then made one for each of her three children from her own dresses. Active memorials, reminders of life lived, or the hard-nosed edged realities of recycling as an imperative. Quilts have, as we know documented major wars, epidemics, suffrage and emancipation. Stallybrass describes this "A network of cloth can trace the connections of love across the boundaries of absence, of death, because cloth is able to carry the absent body, memory, genealogy as well as literal material value." (Stallybrass 2012, 74)

## **Memorial**

The research for the exhibition *Outside* with my collaborator the artist and academic Dr Claire Barber has explored the signature sheets of women internees from the Far East in WW2

*The Sheet* by Day Joyce is the diary of her capture and then imprisonment in the Stanley Internment camp in Hong Kong she described *the Sheet* as a record of the "Big and little things, simple and important things." (Joyce 1974, 2) Day was working as a nurse when invasion became imminent she was billeted to Lasalle college. In the oral history recordings of Joyce recorded in 1975 by the Imperial War Museum, Day describes the mayhem all around, near the time of capture the nurses were told to take anything they required from the college store, Day already had the double bed sheet with her but took bandages and some Chinese pyjamas. She had the presence of mind to take the sheet to stitch on, in her words 'to keep me calm and in my own thoughts'. She recalls her terror as the



occupiers moved closer. She speaks of the luck that befell her fellow nurses and a group of Catholic nuns being captured by officers rather than by soldiers and therefore evading many of the worst atrocities suffered by others.

On the sheet she began her meticulous and beautifully rendered chain stitch signatures, the stitch work is almost always rendered in this way sometimes in silks that other internees donated. At other moments using drawn threads from their own garments and bandages as in the white on white work. The signatures were collected and written onto the cloth or onto paper that Day then transcribed. She would then assign colour or composition to various groups.

In the Lasalle college section the nun's names are depicted in pale blue thread. Day developed a meticulous system of coding and gathering of information and sometimes, small objects or gifts. And so began her daily ritual, the role call of interns, the survivors and deceased, names clearly stated, details in code. ("As of 8<sup>th</sup> April, 2018 the Imperial War Museum listed on it's website [www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80015588](http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80015588)")

The embroidered blue tablecloth by Rosalina A Raymonds documents, her internment in Bandoeng camp, West Java, Figure 2. Rosalina was held with her mother and six sisters. The cloth depicts camp life it is stitched from threads pulled from scraps of fabrics and it contains the dates of the three camps they were held in and like Day Joyce's sheet it contains the signatures of her inmates. In contrast to the *Sheet* it is a stark illustrative rendering of camp life, portraying every aspect in quite a daring way as we can see from it is stitched in mainly a stem stitch, the style is very gestural in appearance.

The *Sheet* is much more covert and coded, shying away from telling plainly what was happening. It appears from both women's accounts that they produced these works as a salve for their spirits a way of engaging, but also a way of documenting their ordeal and keeping an inventory of life and conditions.

Day Joyce stitched a lot of information in code, afraid to tell what really happened, she was clearly under no illusion of what her fate would be if caught. She describes the day 'When I nearly met my end', that day she received two letters on blue paper, a search of the camp by the Japanese soldiers coincided with this, the sheet was safe between her blankets but her letters were on her bed. She knew that she would have been executed if they were found, so she quickly tore them up and made a paper chain leaving it lying on the floor.

By 1943 she says that the camp had become too dangerous to continue the *Sheet*, in the interview her voice becomes very quiet saying, "can you see a tiny arrow? What a fearful person I am.....A colourless arrow, 43 saw a set of executions".

The sheet is so beautifully and meticulously stitched, the juxtaposition of order and expansive free areas make you feel that you are in fact encountering a piece of Contemporary Art. It is stitched by a fine nurses hand, a counterpoint, to the cruelty and destruction all around. In contrast the blue tablecloth is raw and emotional, Barber and I were startled by its visceral presence possibly because we were able to handle it but as an object it conveyed something extraordinary. The sheet is edged, in a crazy patchwork of fine silks and rice sacks, a rainbow of colours, the stark reality of these women's changed circumstances playing

itself out on the edge of a kind of memorial quilt, Figure 3. Day's optimism and humour shines through when she recalls her year in Hong Kong before the war. Day describes this period saying ' we worked tremendously hard all this extra training, but I also played deliciously hard.' ("As of 8<sup>th</sup> April, 2018 the Imperial War Museum listed on it's website [www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80015588](http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80015588)")

Stitch is used in a very particular context within these two signature pieces, both women use it as a vehicle to express and record the harshest events as Joyce puts it 'being too fearful to put down directly'

This paper is a story of three cultural moments, across a timeline of nearly 2000 years. The constant here is the use of cloth as a material of significance and a vehicle to bring communities together in its production and conception.

The communal and cross societal production of the Paracas textiles resonate with the making of both the American Pioneer quilts and the Signature sheets. At the centre of these very different textiles lie the coming together of communities in a common purpose, in the construction of significant artefacts to celebrate and document the lives of individuals.

Cloth is our intimate material of choice, and for both the American pioneer women and the far eastern internees, it was the material readily at hand. It is never far from us as humans and is one of the reasons that we bring it to bear at key moments of life and death: as a salve, a cover, for remembrance and

memorial in a form of social enactment and engagement. This is almost certainly to do with cloth's unique properties, its ability to hold our human trace, the writer and academic Professor Jessica Hemmings explains this:

Textiles remember. This is not something we necessarily ask of them, nor is it something we can divert them from doing. They do it regardless. And the memory of the textile is unremittingly democratic: moments of joy and tragedy are recorded on the surface and embedded into the structure of cloth, without permission and often without intention (Hemmings 2012,57)

Cloth's materiality enables stories to be told, stories of hardship and humour, fears and hopes. Stories about lives lived. Stories of stoicism and humility, cloth this wonderful material is at the heart of all of these things.

Main text without abstract and refs 2391 words

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Figure 1. 1880 - 1890 Kaziah Bathurst's Quilt, The National Museum of American History, open access source

Figure 2. Rosalina A Raymonds, The embroidered blue table cloth, Bandoeng Camp, West Java, Civilian Internee, Imperial War Museum, World War II. Image copyright Penny Macbeth

Figure 3. Day Joyce, embroidered Sheet, Stanley Internment Camp, Hong Kong, Civilian Internee, Imperial War Museum, World War II. Image copyright Penny Macbeth